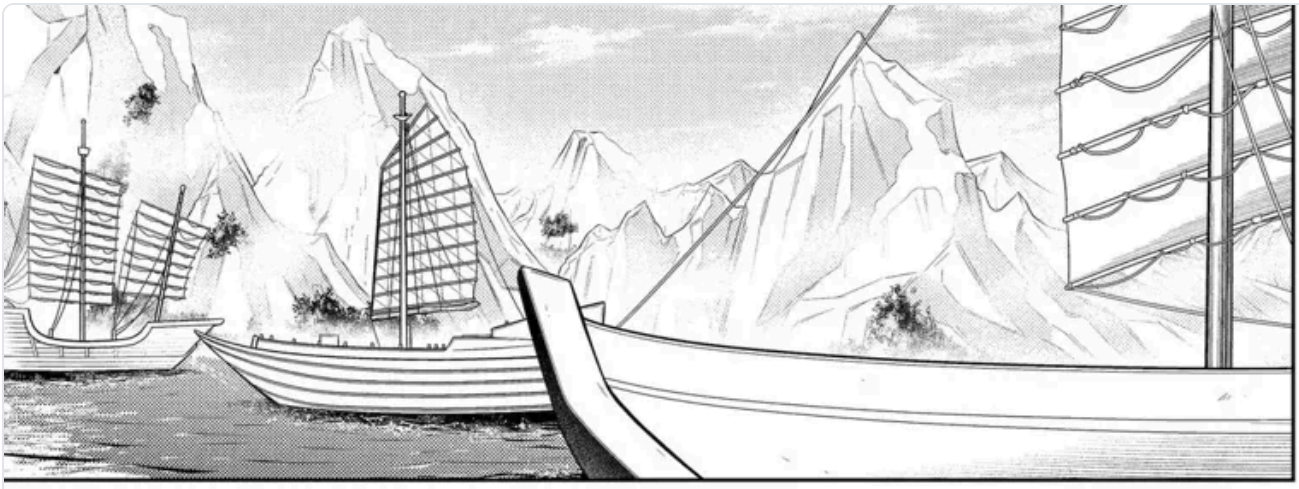
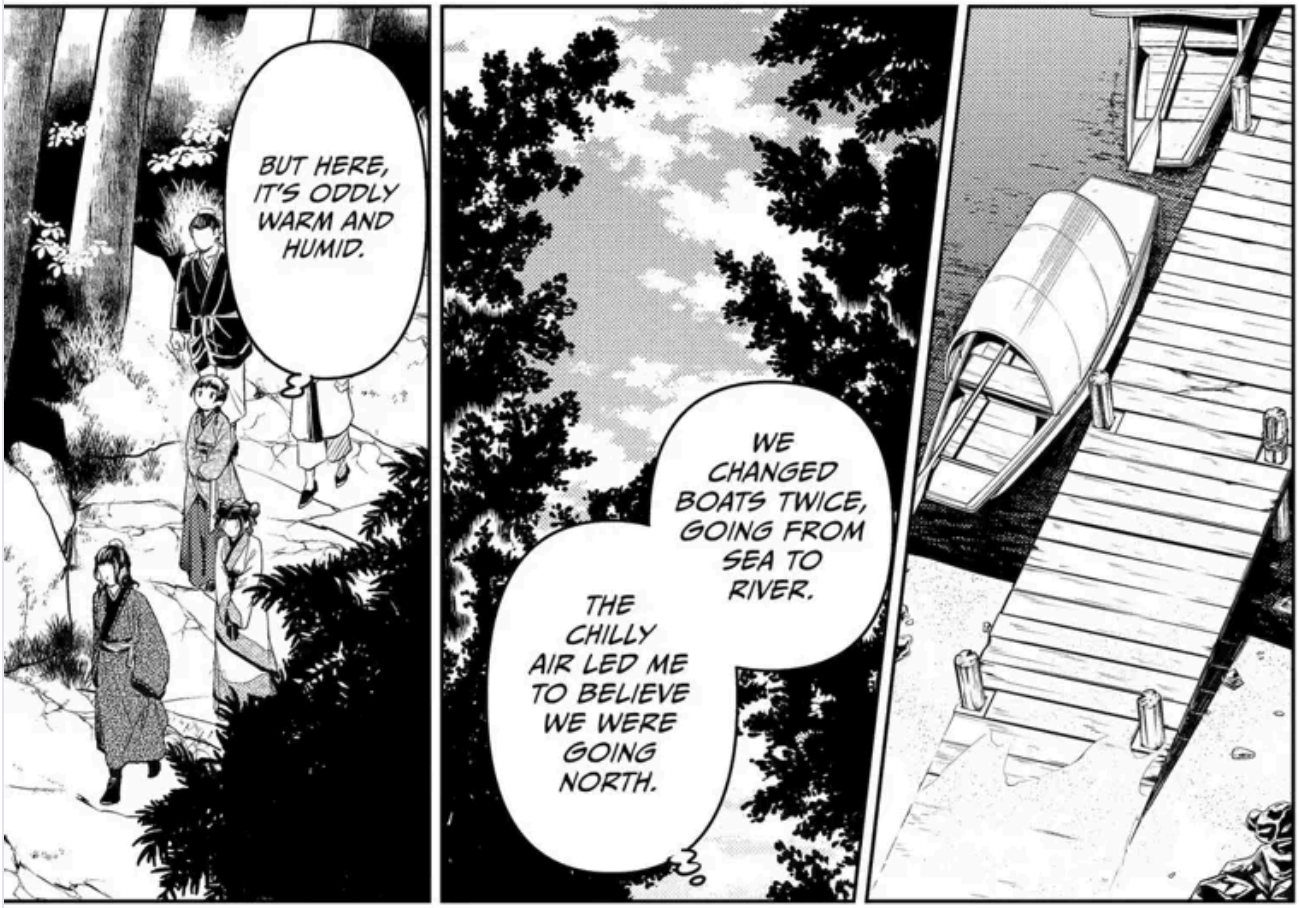



BUT HERE, IT'S ODDLY WARM AND HUMID.
WE CHANGED BOATS TWICE, GOING FROM SEA TO RIVER.
THE CHILLY AIR LED ME TO BELIEVE WE WERE GOING NORTH.

CRNCH
CRNCH
PHEW...
CRNCH
CRNCH

WHERE COULD WE BE?
Chapter 74: The Fox Village ①

THERE WERE TWO GUARDS WITH SUIREI, SO... I HAD NO OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE A BREAK FOR IT.
AS SOON AS WE GOT ONTO LAND, THEY BOUND MY HANDS WITH ROPE.
PEEK
IF NOT FOR SHISUI'S CONTINUED INSECT OBSES-SION.
GLANCE
GLANCE
FROM THIS ANGLE, THEY ALMOST LOOK LIKE A COUPLE IN A PICTURE SCROLL.
A PERFECT PAIR. A HUSBAND AND WIFE.

WHAT'S THAT?
RSTL
RSTL
JOLT
A PLUMP LOOKING SNAKE?
IS SUIREI AFRAID OF SNAKES?
HMMM. I SUPPOSE WE ALL HAVE ONE OR TWO THINGS WE CAN'T STAND.

TOSS
GRAB

PLOP
MAOMAO!

FWMP
HISSSS
TOSS
GRAB
HAAH
HAAH
HAAH
SWSH

THAT REALLY GOT HER.
HAAH
HAAH
HAAH
HAAH
HAAH
HAAH
LET ME SEE HER.
HEY!
YOU...

IF YOU WOULD, MAOMAO.
HAAH
HAAH
HAAH

THMP
HAAH
THMP
HAAH
MATCH MY RHYTHM. IN, OUT.
HAAH
HAAH
THMP
THMP
HAAH
THMP
THMP
HAAH
HAAH
THMP
HFF
HFF
THMP
HFF

WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?
SIMPLE. I WANTED TO MESS WITH YOU.
DON'T TELL ME THAT'S ALL YOU HAD IN MIND.
YOU KNEW SHISUI WELL BEFORE ALL OF THIS.
WHY WOULD A HOSTAGE PROTECT HER OWN CAPTOR FROM A SNAKE?
AND HOW COULD SHE ORDER THE GUARDS AROUND?

HA HA HA HA!
YOU SET A TRAP...
AND I WALKED RIGHT INTO IT!
BUT, PLEASE, NO MORE.
MY OLDER SISTER JUST HATES SNAKES.
SO THEY DON'T CARE IF I KNOW, IS THAT IT?
LET ME HELP YOU UP.

I TOLD YOU OUR NAMES ARE TOO OBVIOUS.
COME ON, NONE OF THE OTHER GIRLS NOTICED!
HER FASCINATION WITH INSECTS AND WORKING AS A MASSEUSE IN THE BATH HOUSE HELPED TO DEFLECT SUSPICION, BUT...
...THE HIGH-CLASS QUALITY OF HER EDUCATION WAS CLEAR IN MANY OTHER WAYS.
THERE ARE PLENTY OF SERVANT GIRLS WHO ARE NO DIFFERENT.
LIKE YOU, FOR EXAMPLE.
DOES THAT MEAN SHE'S ALREADY LOOKED INTO MY OWN BACK-GROUND?

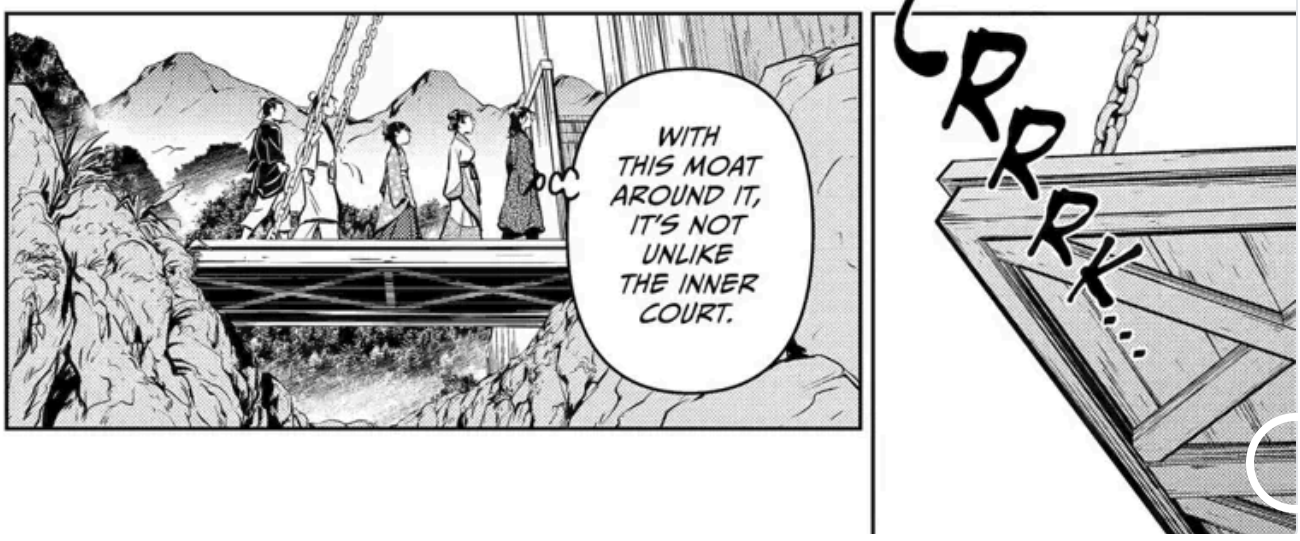
NOW THAT I THINK ABOUT IT, HER SUGGESTION TO WORK IN THE BATH HOUSE IN THE FIRST PLACE...
...MUST HAVE BEEN TO KEEP IN CONTACT WITH SUIREI ...
... WHO HAD BEEN IN DISGUISE AS THE WATER CHANGING EUNUCH.
AH!
BACK WHEN WE FOUND THE KITTEN THAT HAD COME IN FROM THE UNDER-GROUND PASSAGE ...
...WE SPOTTED YOU COMING FROM THE SAME EXACT DIRECTION.
AW. NOT MUCH OF A SPY, AM I?

IF YOU KNEW ALL THAT, WHY DID YOU COME WITH US?
TRY TO BE MORE CAREFUL FROM NOW ON.

...
WELL, WHY DID YOU TAKE ME?
...THAT WOULD AT LEAST MEAN THEY WON'T SNUFF ME OUT RIGHT AWAY.
I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT THEY HAVE PLANNED FOR ME...
...BUT IF THEY WANT TO KEEP HIM IN CHECK ...
DOES THAT MEAN THERE'S NO POINT IN RUNNING?
SLICE
AND MAOMAO, TOO.
AH, WELL. GO AHEAD AND CUT ME LOOSE.

CRNCH CRNCH
WELL NOW. A VILLAGE HIDDEN IN THE WOODS.

WAVE
WAVE


WITH THIS MOAT AROUND IT, IT'S NOT UNLIKE THE INNER COURT.
GRRRK...

もわっ
POFF
STEAM BLANKETS THE ROADS, POURING FROM THE CANALS.
PEOPLE ARE WEARING BATHROBES.
IS THIS... A HOT-SPRING RESORT?
IT IS.
THE HOT-SPRING IS THE ONLY REASON A VILLAGE WAS BUILT HERE.

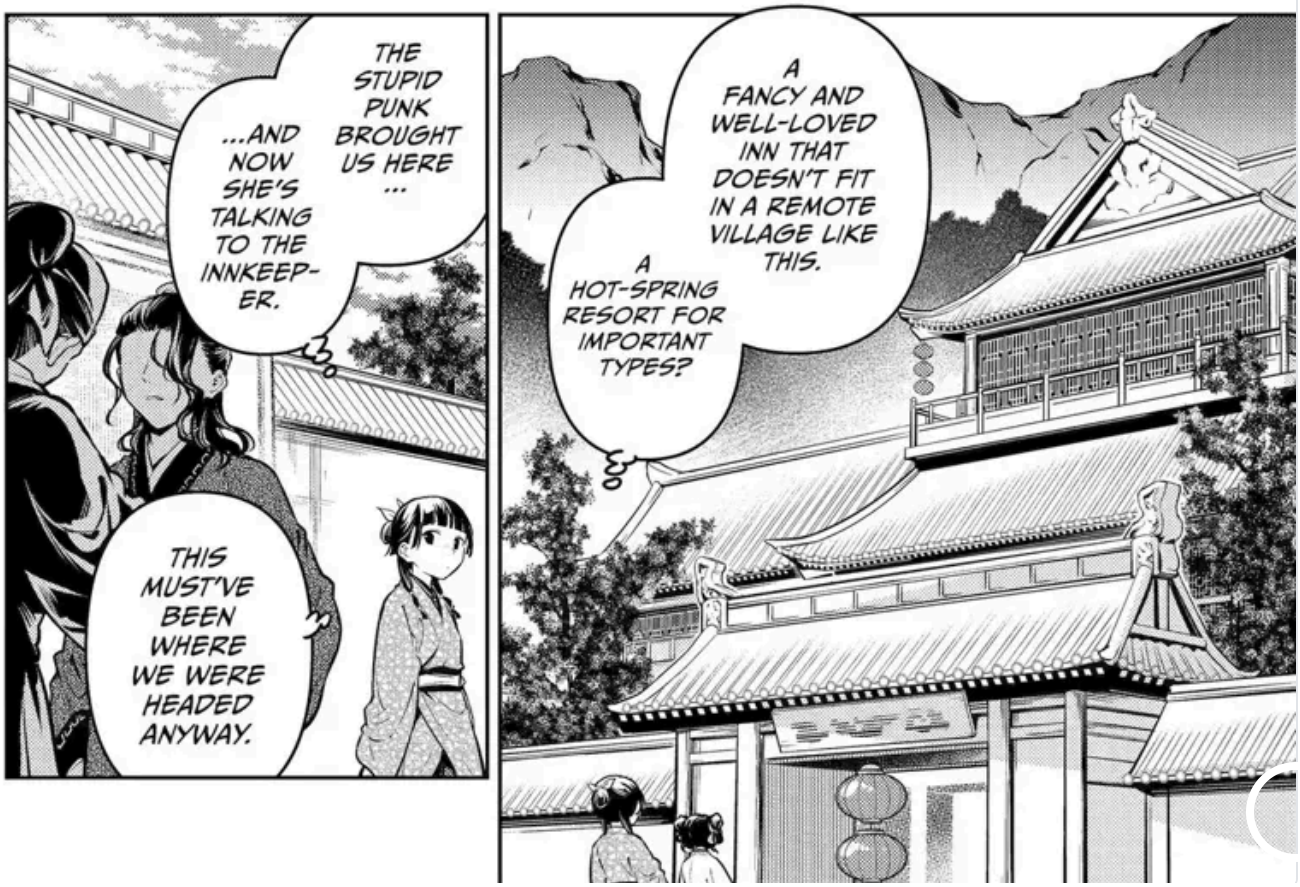
THAT EXPLAINS THE WARM HUMIDITY.
THAT BUILD AND HAIR COLOR...
IT'S ALL JUST LIKE THE SPECIAL ENVOYS.
...HM?
THERE'S A FOREIGNER HERE.
THD
HEY!
IT COULDN'T BE...

STUPID PUNK.
FROM HIS HAIR AND CLOTHES, HE SEEMS FROM AN AFFLUENT FAMILY. STAY CALM, MAOMAO.
IRK
WHERE'RE YOU LOOKIN'?!
STANDIN' AROUND WITH YOUR HEAD IN THE CLOUDS!
I'D KNOCK HIM FLAT IF THIS WERE THE PLEASURE DISTRICT.
KYOU-U!
BONK
OW!

OH!
AND THAT'S SUIREI WITH YA?
IT'S YOUR FAULT FOR NOT WATCHING WHERE YOU'RE GOING.
SIS!
BE QUIET.
WOW, COOL! NICE GETUP!
YEAH!
BUT I GUESS NAN LIED!
I HEARD YOU WOULDN'T BE COMING AROUND NO MORE!

OH, OH!
YOU GOTTA BE HERE FOR THE FESTIVAL TOMOR-ROW!
FES-TIVAL?
THAT'S RIGHT.
LUCKY US, WE GOT HERE JUST IN TIME.
YOU GOT PAPER LANTERNS READY?
NOT YET. WE'VE ONLY JUST COME BACK.
'KAY! FOLLOW ME!
TAKING A CLOSER LOOK AROUND, I DO SEE PREPARATIONS TO THAT EFFECT.

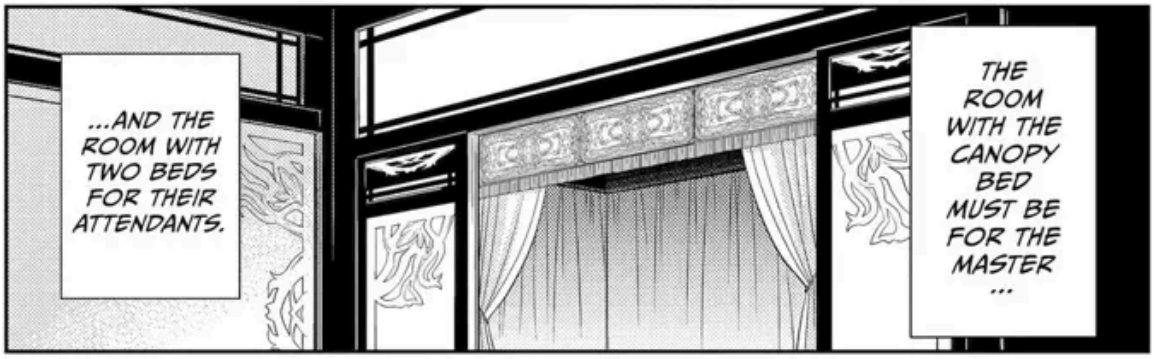
ANYTHING WORTHWHILE LEFT?


THE STUPID PUNK BROUGHT US HERE ...
...AND NOW SHE'S TALKING TO THE INNKEEP-ER.
THIS MUST'VE BEEN WHERE WE WERE HEADED ANYWAY.
A FANCY AND WELL-LOVED INN THAT DOESN'T FIT IN A REMOTE VILLAGE LIKE THIS.
A HOT-SPRING RESORT FOR IMPORTANT TYPES?

LOOM
I KNEW IT. EARLIER, I SAW—
WONDERING WHY A SPECIAL ENVOY WOULD BE HERE, ARE YOU?
A PALANQUIN OF PECULIAR MAKE.
AND A FOREIGNER IS MAINTAINING IT.
FWP
YIKES!
...YOU KNOW ABOUT THE SPECIAL ENVOYS?

AH. A RARE JOKE FROM HER.
I HAD MUCH TO DO AFTER MY APPARENT DEATH.
NOT EVEN CORPSES CAN REMAIN IDLE.
MAYBE DYING CAUSED HER TO LOOSEN UP A BIT?
THE ROOMS ARE FANCY, TOO.

...TWO ARE BEDROOMS, AND THE MIDDLE ONE IS A SITTING ROOM.
DIVIDED INTO THREE CHAMBERS...


...AND THE ROOM WITH TWO BEDS FOR THEIR ATTENDANTS.
THE ROOM WITH THE CANOPY BED MUST BE FOR THE MASTER ...

I SUPPOSE IF YOU CALL ME LIKE THAT, I CAN ONLY OBEY.
...GIVEN THAT SUIREI IS ELSEWHERE, I WOULD BET.
SHE DOESN'T WANT TO LEAVE ME TO MY OWN DEVICES ...
MAO-MAO!
WE'RE GOING TO SEE KYOU-U!
HE'S WAITING IN THE COURT-YARD.

HMM, I GUESS SO, YEAH.
IS THIS ENOUGH, YOUNG MASTER?
WHITE FOX MASKS?
ARE THEY GOING TO USE THESE BRUSHES AND PIGMENTS TO COLOR THEM?
BUNDLES OF GRAINS, GRASS, AND EARS OF RICE LINED UP ON THE TABLE.
AND LANTERN PLANTS. RARE THIS TIME OF YEAR.

THEY'VE WITHERED, BUT THEIR COLOR IS STILL VERY VIBRANT.
EH HEH HEH
I TRIED REAL HARD TO FIND THOSE 'CUZ I KNEW YA LIKED 'EM, SIS!
WOW, THANK YOU!
FOR A MAID?
BUT YOU WEREN'T LOOKING FOR THESE ON YOUR OWN, WERE YOU?

THANK YOU.
I'LL OMIT THE "STUPID" FROM THE PUNK TITLE.
I SUPPOSE HE'S GOT A SHRED OF HONESTY IN THERE SOME-WHERE.
AHH, LEMME GO, SIS!
HMM. HE IS MALE, WITH ALL THAT BRINGS, ISN'T HE?
GOOD FOR YOU!
GRAB
WAH!

TEN DAYS HAVE PASSED SINCE MAOMAO'S DISAPPEAR-ANCE.

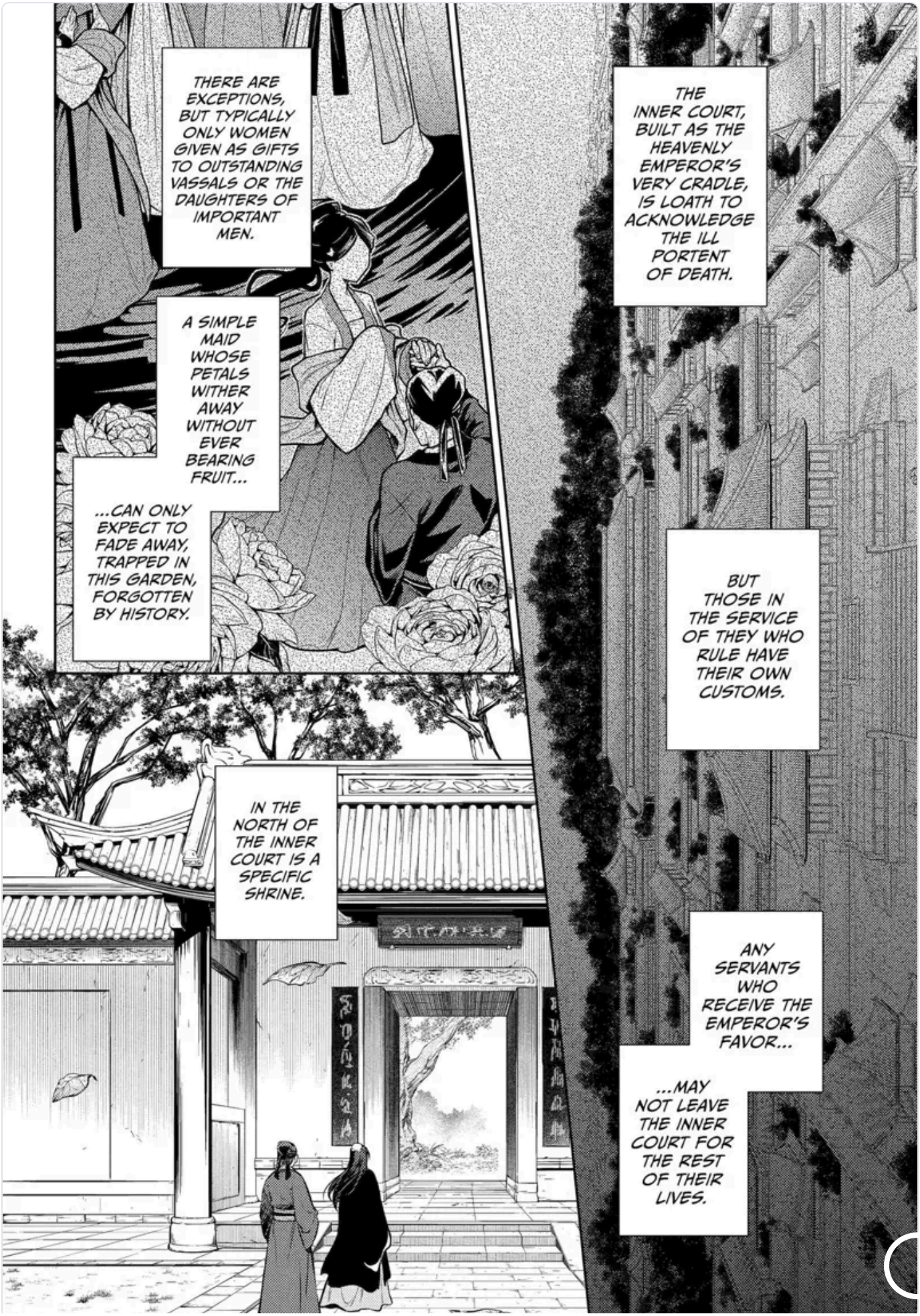
I HEARD SHE WENT INTO LABOR THIS MORNING.
HOW IS SHE?
CONSORT GYOKUYO'S CONDITION HAD BEEN IRREGULAR THE PAST FEW DAYS.
LUOMEN CARED FOR HER AROUND THE CLOCK.
THE JADE PALACE IS IN A FRENZY PREPARING FOR THE EARLY BIRTH.
I'M SURE EVERYONE'S GATHERED SHE'S ABOUT TO GIVE BIRTH BY NOW.
HER CONTRACTIONS HAVE SUBSIDED. SHE'S SETTLED DOWN, FOR THE TIME BEING.

I SEE.
PHEW
DID MAOMAO'S TREATMENTS WORK, THEN?
THERE IS STILL NO INDICATION AS TO WHEN THE BABY WILL COME...
...BUT I CAN TELL YOU THERE IS NO DANGER OF A BREECH BIRTH.
EITHER WAY, THIS IS NO TIME TO RELAX.
YES, SIR.
IF YOU NEED ANYTHING, SIMPLY SEND FOR ME.
THEN I LEAVE IT TO YOU.

WHAT OF THE VANISHED EUNUCH?
HAAAA

...NONE OF THE OTHER EUNUCHS KNEW HIM.
AS A FREED SLAVE OF A FOREIGN TRIBE...
HIS NAME WAS TIAN.

ANYTHING ELSE?
AND IN THAT CASE, WE CAN ASSUME THIS "TIAN" WAS OUT TO DO SOMETHING SUSPECT FROM THE VERY BEGINNING.
...IT'S POSSIBLE THEY WERE INFILTRATED.
BEFORE THE SLAVES CAME HERE, TO THE INNER COURT, AS EUNUCHS ...
THAT ISN'T PARTICULARLY UNUSUAL. ANYONE DEVOUT ENOUGH COULD BE SEEN DOING THAT.
...SEEING SOMEONE RESEMBLING TIAN BEFORE A SHRINE, HANDS CLASPED AS THOUGH IN PRAYER.
ONE EUNUCH REPORT-ED...
YES.
BUT THE SHRINE IN QUESTION WAS...


THERE ARE EXCEPTIONS, BUT TYPICALLY ONLY WOMEN GIVEN AS GIFTS TO OUTSTANDING VASSALS OR THE DAUGHTERS OF IMPORTANT MEN.
A SIMPLE MAID WHOSE PETALS WITHER AWAY WITHOUT EVER BEARING FRUIT...
...CAN ONLY EXPECT TO FADE AWAY, TRAPPED IN THIS GARDEN, FORGOTTEN BY HISTORY.
IN THE NORTH OF THE INNER COURT IS A SPECIFIC SHRINE.
THE INNER COURT, BUILT AS THE HEAVENLY EMPEROR'S VERY CRADLE, IS LOATH TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE ILL PORTENT OF DEATH.
BUT THOSE IN THE SERVICE OF THEY WHO RULE HAVE THEIR OWN CUSTOMS.
ANY SERVANTS WHO RECEIVE THE EMPEROR'S FAVOR...
...MAY NOT LEAVE THE INNER COURT FOR THE REST OF THEIR LIVES.

THOSE WHO PASS WITHIN THESE WALLS...
...AND LAID TO REST HERE, AS THEY CANNOT BE RETURNED TO WHATEVER HOME THEY MAY HAVE HAD.

AN OLDER LADY-IN-WAITING.
SWSH
BOW

WAFT
A PUNGENT...
...AND ACRID SMELL, CHARACTERISTIC OF DISTILLED SPIRITS.

THAT'S THE SMELL OF ALCOHOL. IT HAS TO BE, RIGHT?
GRAB

WHAT IS IT, SIR?

WHERE IS MAOMAO?

CALM DOWN.
HERE ...
I AM JINSHI, THE EUNUCH.
HFF...
I WAS WONDERING, WOULD YOU REMEMBER A FRECKLED LADY-IN-WAITING?

SHUDDER
SHE HAS TO KNOW SOMETHING.
HER PULSE SPIKED.
GRP
A SIGN OF FOREIGN BLOOD?
HER EYES ARE FLECKED WITH GREEN.

LONG AGO...
...A GENTLE VOICE CALLED MY NAME, AND OFFERED ME SWEETS FROM A FOREIGN LAND.
...I REMEMBER THAT HE, TOO... HAD A VOICE AS SWEET AS HONEY...
...AND THE FACE OF A CELESTIAL NYMPH.
BUT BY THE TIME I HAD TURNED 14, HE NO LONGER CAME TO SEE ME.
I NEVER ONCE SAW HIM, EVEN AS HIS LIFE DREW TO A CLOSE, BUT...
WHAT IS SOMEONE LIKE YOU DOING, PLAYING THE PART OF A EUNUCH?

FWP
GRAB

DAMN—!
SOME-ONE, BRING SOME WATER!
GLUG
GLUG